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Education and other sustainable development goals: a shifting agenda for comparative education

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Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) look set to replace the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 (United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Rio+20 2012; High-Level Panel 2013). Sustainable development is defined as having economic, social, environmental and governance dimensions (Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2013). Those who see the environment as enveloping human systems would see this as a dilution of the environmental dimension (Jickling and Wals 2008). Certainly, within the High-Level Panel's report subtitled *Eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development*, the shift towards a sustainable development agenda is not a break with the logic of neoliberal economics. Nonetheless, it represents the most significant re-balancing of the notion of international development since the concept of international development emerged in the 1950s.

Within the debate on an education goal, sustainable development, most especially the environmental dimension, has not been centre stage. The synthesis of the consultation led by UNESCO and UNICEF points out interactions between education and other goals and criticizes the compartmentalized approach taken to the Millennium Development Goals (UNICEF/UNESCO 2013) but does not go much further. There is an emerging consensus that to promote equity, targets associated with an education goal should be designed to direct efforts at the poorest, which is consistent with the social dimension of sustainable development. A second consensus is for a "life-cycle" (Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2013: 12; UNICEF/UNESCO 2013: 7) or lifelong learning goal (High-Level Panel 2013; UNICEF/UNESCO 2013) with targets across educational levels from early childhood through to postsecondary skills and vocational education. This has potential to link into a goal for work and employment and support economically sustainable development (McGrath 2013). Higher Education has not appeared as part of a proposed education goal. This is in contrast to the heavy emphasis placed on Higher Education as a core aspect of capacity building for sustainable development in the Rio+20 outcome document from the conference that placed SDGs firmly on the agenda (United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Rio+20 2012). As McGrath (2013), the emphasis on capacity building and with it Higher Education tails out in the HLP report. Within comparative and international education scholars have long argued for capacity building in and through Higher Education (Koehn 2011).

A third point of consensus, is that an education goal should include targets, particularly for literacy, numeracy and skills (Center for Universal Education at Brookings 2011; UNICEF/UNESCO 2013). The emphasis on learning is consistent with the World Bank's latest education strategy (World Bank 2011), titled *Learning for All*. This poses challenges with respect to measurement of learning (Barrett 2011) and also for how we decide what learning matters, as I argued in an earlier Compare Forum (Barrett 2011). It is with respect to the question of what learning we should care about in the twenty-first century that education researchers need to engage with the wider development agenda.

The Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development viewed education as a goal for promoting knowledge and awareness about the environment and developing skills for sustainable development (United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Rio+20 2012). Research in comparative and international education, however, reveals that formal education's contribution to sustainable development is as ambiguous as its relationship to conflict, captured by Bush and Saltarelli's (2000) much cited "two faces of education" analogy. Whilst formal education may be a tool for promoting scientific knowledge about the environment, it also has a track record of undervaluing local knowledge and ontological perspectives respectful of the natural world (Santos 2007; Bainton and Crossley 2010; Aikman and King 2012) and through its language policies contributing to the loss of minority languages that carry local knowledge and ontologies (Maffi 2005; Ross 2006). Whilst education can develop critical and problem-solving skills and promote values for working together, as a selective system that links examination success to job opportunities, security and earnings, it also functions to reproduce inequality (see for example, Wang 2011). As education services are increasingly corporatized and commercialised internationally, so scholars have argued it becomes more vulnerable to the values of consumerism and neoliberalism (Jickling and Wals 2008; Robertson 2012). For example, whilst it is argued above that Higher Education makes a vital contribution to capacity building, Haigh (2008) points out the commercial interests of Western universities contradict sustainable development by promoting a standardised model of education and the hegemony of Western knowledge (Santos 2012). In a bid to ensure that education is included in the post-2015 agenda in a more expanded form than the education MDG, the post-2015 debate has tended to focus on the positive face of education. As researchers, however, we should not turn our gaze away from the negative face of education but continue with research and analysis that exposes and seeks to transform that face.

Conclusion: Comparative Education post-2015

The SDG era may not, for comparativists, feel very different from the MDG era. The work of resisting policy homogenization and drawing attention to the specificity of local contexts will continue with greater imperative, as will the work of exposing and reforming the colonial heritage with respect to how identity, culture and knowledge are constructed and limited within formal education (Holmes and Crossley 2004; Hickling-Hudson 2007). We will find ourselves continuing to work to build capacity for research and leadership of quality improvement in specific contexts. However, to understand what constitutes a good quality relevant education in the twenty-first century will require greater engagement with other development goals, including the environmental dimension of sustainable development (Bangay and Blum 2010; Crossley and Sprague In Press). This work will continue to be conducted against a global context of intensified commercialisation and standardisation. Within this context, a target for learning outcomes may increase the influence of an international industry in measuring learning outcomes, which has its centres of expertise mainly in wealthy countries in the global North increasing the imperative to argue for local determination and debate of learning goals.

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